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INTERNATIONAL

Elliott Abrams Pushes Harder U.S. Line Against Nicaragua's Leftist Government

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WASHINGTON—Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, keeps a framed copy on his office wall of an article from the Cuban newspaper Granma. It begins: "*Abrams es una bestia*," (Abrams is a beast).

"I can think of very few greater accolades for somebody in Latin American affairs than to be called an animal by the Cuban Communist Party newspaper," says Mr. Abrams. "It also helps visitors to the office orient themselves as to my general policy outlook," he adds with a laugh.

Mr. Abrams's conservative credentials are very much on display. His two predecessors lost their jobs in fights with Reagan administration hard-liners about Central America policy. But Mr. Abrams's appointment in July signaled that the State Department, once suspected as a sanctuary for "moderates," is in harmony with the hard-liners. After spending the past few months learning his new job, Mr. Abrams is spearheading a renewed administration drive to increase the stakes in the battle against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

In congressional testimony last week, he charged that Cuban pilots and soldiers are playing an increasing role in the Sandinistas' fight against U.S.-backed insurgents, known as Contras. He argues that the stronger Cuban role tilts the strategic balance in favor of the Sandinistas and requires Congress to provide more aid, including military supplies, to the Contras. Last spring, Congress gave the Contras \$27 million in "non-lethal" aid to be spent by March 1986. The administration hasn't decided how much additional aid it will request.

The campaign represents the administration's third rhetorical escalation in its five-year fight against the Sandinistas. Initially, President Reagan said aid to the Contras was needed to intercept Nicaraguan weapons shipments to leftist rebels in neighboring El Salvador. Next, the White



Elliott Abrams

House said it was pressuring Managua because the Sandinistas were building a huge military machine that threatened their neighbors. In last week's comments, Mr. Abrams raised the specter of a permanent Cuban presence on the American mainland.

But Some Aren't Buying

"If Cuba wishes to raise the stakes, then we're going to have to meet that challenge and prevent Cuba from taking over a country in Central America, or we're just going to walk away from it. I believe that when Congress takes a look at those two alternatives, they're going to take the first one," he says.

Some liberals in Congress don't buy the Abrams line. Rep. Samuel Gejdenson (D., Conn.), a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, warns that "greater levels of military assistance will only raise the battle and end up with more human carnage and very little different results." He fears that the administration may end up sending U.S. troops to fight the Sandinistas.

Nevertheless, the debate in the months ahead won't be over whether the Contras get more aid, but over how much and what kind of assistance they will receive.

Managua has few defenders on Capitol Hill because of Congress's concerns about the Soviet-bloc presence in Nicaragua and a series of public-relations blunders by the Sandinistas. Indeed, President Reagan has succeeded so well in moving the debate to the right, that the former conservative position—that the Sandinistas must be contained within their borders—has now become the mainstream liberal position.

Administration conservatives, led by Mr. Abrams, now argue that to insure long-term stability in the region, the Sandinistas must go.

Mr. Abrams says the administration no longer believes in the "nonaggression pact" theory, under which moderates sought to negotiate a settlement with Managua. "Without some internal change in that regime, such an agreement wouldn't be worth the paper it's printed on," he says. Managua would use an agreement to lull the U.S. into abandoning the Contras, leaving the field free for Sandinista aggression on another day, he says.

The Perfect Choice

Mr. Abrams appears to be the perfect choice to deliver this message. At age 37,

he is deeply entrenched in the conservative establishment—his in-laws, Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter, are respected conservative authors and editors—and he is trusted by hard-liners.

At the same time, he won the respect of many moderates in his previous State Department job as assistant secretary for human rights by sharply criticizing human rights abuses by right-wing regimes in Chile and Argentina. "I felt Elliott was very often a voice for relatively strong human rights in an administration that wasn't very receptive to that," says Rep. Michael Barnes (D., Md.), chairman of the House foreign affairs subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs. Critics note, however, that Mr. Abrams's defense of human rights was subordinated to his anti-communist zeal in dealing with Central America nations.

But his experience at the Human Rights Bureau, where he had little real power, taught Mr. Abrams that to get things done he had to work closely with other officials and agencies. That is a lesson he has transferred to his current job, allowing him to avoid the turf fights and backbiting that characterized interagency relations under his immediate predecessor, Langhorne Motley.

Mr. Abrams, who chairs a weekly inter-agency meeting on Central America, says he speaks daily to his counterparts at the National Security Council, Defense Department and Central Intelligence Agency. Before he attended a U.S.-Soviet meeting in November on regional issues he convened a meeting of 30 officials from different agencies to discuss the agenda. When he returned from the two-day session, he gave the interagency group the official notes of the meetings.

Indeed, there is little need these days for the secret planning that Mr. Motley undertook when, for example, he arranged for Secretary of State George Shultz to meet in Managua with Sandinista leaders. There aren't any policy differences among the senior officials who are guiding Central America policy. As a result, Mr. Abrams says he is ready to focus his attention on Congress.

"I think we have the hearts and minds of the people in Nicaragua. We need the hearts and minds of congressmen at this point," he says.